Article

The long shadow of territorial stigma: Upward social mobility and the symbolic baggage of the old neighbourhood

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Abstract

In recent years, a burgeoning number of studies have shed light on the lived experience of territorial stigma. However, the vibrant academic discourse on the stigma of place focuses almost exclusively on residents living in marginalised neighbourhoods: it either overlooks or simplifies the lived experience of 'moving out' and 'up'. Building upon 43 biographical interviews with individuals who experienced upward social mobility and were raised in stigmatised neighbourhoods in Germany, this article argues that the experience of exiting from the symbolic bottom of the urban structure is a more complex and conflictual one. In particular, this work sheds light on how former residents learn to relate to the symbolic baggage of having once lived in a notorious neighbourhood. By analysing the three prevailing coping strategies they engage in, the article shifts attention to the prolonged and lasting impact of territorial stigmatisation.

Keywords

class, inequality, neighbourhood, social mobility, territorial stigmatisation

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摘要

近年来，越来越多的研究揭示了区域污名化的生活体验。然而，关于地方污名的充满活力的学术讨论几乎完全集中于生活在边缘化街区的居民身上：它要么忽视要么简化了"迁出"和"向上迁移"的生活体验。基于对经历过向上社会流动且在被污名化的街区长大的德国个人进行的 43 次传记性采访，本文认为离开具有象征意义的城市底层是一种更为复杂和矛盾的经历。特别是，本文揭示了污名化街区的前居民学会了如何对待这种居住经历的象征性包袱。通过分析他们采取的三种主要的应对策略，本文将注意力转向区域污名化的长期和持久影响。

关键词

阶级、不平等、街区、社会流动、区域污名化

Introduction

After listening to Sabine's biographical narrative, many would be tempted to say, 'she has made it!' Having grown up in a 'deprived' neighbourhood in the Ruhr area in poor circumstances, she was the first and only student in her family to go on to study at a prestigious university in Western Germany. Following her first class degree, Sabine gained work experience with a whole range of well-known political organisations and foundations – not only in Germany, but also in Belgium and the USA. Now, at just 43 years of age, she holds a leading position in a federal institute and lives in a single-family home. Sabine's professional journey sounds like the textbook story of upward mobility.

However, Sabine rarely shares this story with other people. Her colleagues know little about her social background. And they do not know the neighbourhood where she comes from. 'Marxloh has such a bad ghetto reputation, I don't tell anyone here about it', she explains. At her previous job in Düsseldorf, colleagues would react with confusion and sometimes even with fear when she said she was raised in Marxloh: 'You? From Marxloh?' Sabine felt she had to justify herself, although she had been living somewhere else for a long time. As she puts it: 'I still feel that I always have to hide it'.

While Sabine's testimony clearly refers to the phenomenon that has become known as territorial stigmatisation, this very body of literature has, so far, mostly ignored stories like hers. In fact, the vibrant academic discourse on the stigma of place focuses almost exclusively on residents living *in* marginalised neighbourhoods: it either overlooks or simplifies the lived experience of 'moving out' and 'up' (Kirkness and Tije-Dra, 2017; Wacquant, 2008; for two exceptions on the Chicago area see Keene and Padilla, 2010; McCormick et al., 2012). At the same time, both public and policy discourses on poor neighbourhoods routinely present social and geographical mobility as promising and desirable aims. While this normative foundation has been particularly visible in the USA with the implementation of dispersal programmes (for an academic justification see Chetty et al., 2020; for a critique see Imbroscio, 2016), it is also increasingly evident in the Western European policy context where upward social mobility has become praised as a panacea for urban marginality – if only for certain individuals (Raco, 2009).

Against this simplified and celebratory image, this article argues for a more nuanced understanding of the experience of upward social and geographical mobility out of stigmatised neighbourhoods. Building upon 43 biographical interviews with socially mobile

individuals who were raised in neighbourhoods on the bottom rung of the symbolic residential structure in Germany, this article shifts attention to the prolonged and lasting impact of territorial stigmatisation. In particular, I examine how former residents related to and managed the symbolic meaning of their old neighbourhood. Focussing on three prevailing strategies that upwardly mobile respondents employed, I analyse how they coped as individuals with the symbolic baggage of having lived in a marginalised neighbourhood.

I begin this article by offering a critical exposition of the existing literature on people's lived experience of territorial stigmatisation and proceed to introduce the German context and my methodological approach towards upward social mobility biographies. I then show how respondents continue to experience the symbolic power of their old neighbourhood, before turning to the analysis of three prevailing coping strategies: concealment, emphasis on exit and one's own merit and, finally, stigma contestation. Ultimately, I conclude by drawing academic and political implications from this empirical contribution.

Moving out, moving up: Territorial stigma and former residents

By bridging Goffman's (1964) classic interactionist work on stigma and Bourdieu's (1990) theory of symbolic power, Wacquant's (1993, 2008) concept of territorial stigmatisation paid close attention to the symbolic denigration (and symbolic domination) of marginalised neighbourhoods and their residents. In contrast to prevailing North American discourses on the 'culture of poverty', 'the urban underclass' and 'concentrated poverty', Wacquant identified the power of symbolic devaluation as 'the single most protrusive feature of the lived experience of those assigned to, or entrapped in,

such areas' (Wacquant, 1993: 369). While Wacquant used the concept as early as the 1990s, it was mainly after the success of *Urban Outcasts* (Wacquant, 2008) that the symbolic denigration of places attracted much more academic interest. Subsequently, a burgeoning body of studies has explored territorial stigmatisation in various urban and non-urban settings and political formations in recent years.

Alongside a growing corpus of literature on the historical production and political activation of the stigma of place (Baumann and Yacobi, 2022; Larsen and Delica, 2019; Slater, 2018; Tyler and Slater, 2018), a major strand of empirical research has been concerned with the lived experience of territorial stigmatisation (Garbin and Millington, 2012; Pinkster, 2014; Pinkster et al., 2020; Slater and Anderson, 2012). In recent years, this literature has been expanded by a differentiated picture of how individuals respond to or even oppose neighbourhood representations. Scholars have identified a long list of strategies that residents employ to cope with the impact of neighbourhood stigma, ranging from concealment, to spatial deflection by drawing symbolic boundaries within the stigmatised area, to the construction of counter-narratives, to indifference and to anger (Kirkness and Tije-Dra, 2017; Krase, 1977; Pereira and Queirós, 2014; for an extensive review see Halliday et al., 2021). Thus, who ultimately experiences the negative consequences of territorial stigma and what strategy, if any, individuals adopt to cope with it vary significantly, depending on geographical context and individual's position within the social space (Pinkster et al., 2020; Wacquant et al., 2014).

However, while we know more and more about the experiences and coping strategies of current residents *in* stigmatised neighbourhoods, we still know surprisingly little about those who *no longer* live there. For methodological reasons, most scholars focus

on preselected, bounded areas in which they then invite their research subjects to shed light on their everyday experiences: the 'voices within', as, for instance, Jensen and Christensen (2012) put it in their well-known Danish case study. As a consequence, the perspectives of those who have relocated to different areas or who have moved up the symbolic urban class ladder are inevitably overlooked. Yet in many settings and especially in Western Europe, stigmatised neighbourhoods are neither clearly demarcated areas (Madden, 2014), nor are they (despite all the semantics of 'being locked' and 'trapped' in a 'ghetto') places where people are 'damned' to remain for the rest of their lives.

At the same time, the 'insider' perspective and its methodological blindness to socially and geographically mobile groups can go hand in hand with a general romanticism of the lasting effects of spatial vilification. Both public discourse and the academic literature tend to see leaving for good and exiting as a 'tabula rasa solution' (Kirkness and Tije-Dra, 2017: 254). Notably, Wacquant (2008: 238) himself assumes that territorial stigma can be 'quite easily dissimulated and attenuated – even annulled – through geographic mobility and minimal cultural disguising'. However, research on external perspectives of stigmatised neighbourhoods (Elias and Scotson, 1994 [1965]; Hastings, 2004; Permentier et al., 2008) and the very limited empirical work focussing on people who have relocated from stigmatised neighbourhoods suggest that the picture is more complicated. For instance, in his historical exploration of Regent Park, Toronto, Purdy (2003: 92) remarks that there were 'numerous success stories of people who made it […], yet stigmatization was always a conspicuous barrier to overcome'. Crucially, Keene and Padilla (2010) show that African Americans who had moved from the urban neighbourhoods of Chicago to eastern Iowa

retained the stigmatised symbolic traces of the very places they left. They arrived, as one participant of their study put it, 'already labelled'. Moreover, focussing on three mixed-income developments that replaced former public housing in Chicago, McCormick et al. (2012) found that the relocatees had benefitted from the new neighbourhood image, yet were exposed to new forms of stigmatisation that emerged from their new, higher income neighbours.

In sum, it is still far from clear how the symbolic denigration of place affects those who have been 'successful' in leaving the marginalised neighbourhood behind, especially outside the US context. In particular, there is a need and role for empirical research to pay close attention to the different ways in which former residents make sense and relate to the symbolic meaning of their old neighbourhood. Put simply, how do geographically mobile individuals cope with the symbolic baggage of having lived in a stigmatised place?

To examine this question, this article focuses on socially mobile individuals raised in stigmatised neighbourhoods in Germany. This is for two reasons: firstly, as dispersal policies have not yet become a popular policy response to urban marginality in Western Europe, social mobility trajectories provide empirical access to former residents. Of course, this is not to conflate spatial with social mobility – but, in the wake of my research, I found that individuals who experienced increases in personal income and class status were very likely to experience spatial mobility and move out of the stigmatised neighbourhoods. Secondly, as the ideal of upward social mobility itself has become a popular normative foundation for public discourse on neighbourhoods at the bottom of the symbolic structure, this article also attempts to offer a more nuanced understanding of the actual experience of 'striving'. A focus on the symbolic baggage of

neighbourhood taint, then, can help us move past simplistic representations and policy concerns, which tend to celebrate individual upward mobility precisely *in contrast* to being 'trapped' in a poverty zone (e.g. in Chetty et al., 2020).

Geographical context and data

The analysis of symbolic dynamics is crucial for understanding contemporary expressions of urban marginality in Germany (Glasze et al., 2012; Reinecke, 2021). Significantly, as early as 1973, the famous German news magazine *Der Spiegel* ran a titlepage with the lurid headline 'Ghettos in Germany: One Million Turks'. For the following decades, and in many cases inspired by international discourses on racialised urban poverty (Katz, 2013; Reinecke, 2021; Wacquant, 2022), a whole *machinery* (to borrow a term from Tyler (2020)) of territorial stigmatisation has been at work. Ranging from media commentators regularly identifying the 'Bronx' and 'no-go-areas' to urban (and anti-urban) sociologists warning, in apocalyptic tones, of ghettos in Germany (Heitmeyer et al., 1998), to TV channels broadcasting daily shows on unemployed and, seemingly, undeserving residents in urban 'badlands', to politicians using certain *Problemviertel* as scaremongering tactics (Buschkowsky, 2012; Sarrazin, 2010). At the same time, the local policy programme *Soziale Stadt* has been initiating 'destigmatising' policies in several urban areas (Zimmer-Hegmann, 2014; for a critical perspective on territorial destigmatisation policies see Kallin and Slater, 2014; Schultz Larsen and Delica, 2021).

Two types of urban areas can be identified as being particularly affected by stigmatisation processes in Germany. Firstly, this contemporary 'topography of disrepute' includes areas associated with a high proportion of residents from immigrant communities (e.g. Berlin-Neukölln and Duisburg-Marxloh). These neighbourhoods have come to be racialised indicators, 'representative of the public concern about immigration and immigrants in Germany' (Eksner, 2013: 337; see also Kadıoğlu, 2022; Soederberg, 2017). While this discourse has been traditionally centred on so-called guest worker quarters in West Germany, it has recently shift towards urban areas that are associated with refugees from the Middle East and immigrants from Eastern Europe (Böckler et al., 2017). Secondly, special public attention has been paid to large-scale housing estates, often portrayed as vortexes of social disintegration, desperation and frustration and 'arenas of social and emotional malfunction' (Reinecke, 2022: 164). As Glasze et al. (2012: 1208) have emphasised in their comparison of large Polish, French and German housing estates: 'German large housing estates are constituted in hegemonic terms as threatening places and as places of foreignness, which are located outside "proper society"'. This includes a number of large housing estates in Western Germany (e.g. Köln-Chorweiler) (Reinecke, 2021), and, following the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), also prefabricated tower blocks in Eastern Germany (e.g. Berlin-Marzahn) (Cuny, 2019; Glasze et al., 2012).

Focussing on both types of neighbourhoods, this article builds upon an extensive collection of biographical interviews conducted over the course of 1 year in 2020–2021 in the context of a larger research project on the intersections of urban marginality and social mobility in Germany. The data presented here come from 43 in-depth interviews with individuals from stigmatised neighbourhoods who have experienced intergenerational upward social mobility (see descriptive information in Table 1). The interviewees (1) grew up in two specific notorious neighbourhoods preselected by

Table 1. Descriptive information for interviewees (N = 43) (born between 1970–1993, upwardly socially mobile[a]).

Gender	
Female	19
Male	24
'Migration background'	
Yes	21
No	22

[a]Upward social mobility was defined in terms of interviewees' status of origin (parents' occupational status: unskilled and semi-skilled workers or skilled craftsmen and employees completing simple tasks; no higher education entrance qualification) and interviewees' status of destination (interviewee's occupational status: highly qualified employees or professionals and executive employees; university graduates).

the researcher (Chorweiler and Marxloh) or (2) self-identified their neighbourhood of origin as stigmatised (this included several neighbourhoods in Berlin, large-scale housing estates in various cities, specific areas in the Ruhr area (e.g. Dortmund-Nordstadt and Essen-Altenessen), and smaller former (*Gastarbeiter*) working-class settlements). To include both groups allowed me to expand my predefined geographical focus using a larger sample that came from various neighbourhood backgrounds. The participants were recruited via (1) community centres, schools, religious institutions, charitable organisations and clubs in the two preselected neighbourhoods of origin and (2) via alumni networks of scholarship programmes and political foundations. Anonymity has been maintained for all respondents and the research received ethical approval from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

The one- to four-hour long interviews were conducted in the German language and in different settings; namely, face-to-face (in homes, parks, cafes and workplaces) or, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, via Zoom.[1] All interviews began with a single, narrative-inducing question ('tell me your life story'), encouraging respondents to speak extensively and freely. This open-ended phase was followed by a semi-structured part focussing on their neighbourhood of origin and specific aspects of the upward mobility trajectory. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo helped me to map out a thematic overview of the material. This initial thematic coding process was guided by my overall theoretical interest in territorial stigmatisation and the ideal of meritocracy. When refining and restructuring my thematic codes, I became increasingly attentive to the way that the upwardly mobile individuals made sense and coped with the image of their former neighbourhood. This enabled me to refine my analysis of the discursive strategies of the participants. As Cederberg (2014: 145) reminds us: 'biographical interviews are complex, multi-faceted and situated, and they need to be analysed as such, […] by considering the interview context, the researcher's role and the performative aspects of narratives'. Given the extensive interview data generated by this project and the limited space at my disposal here, I use only quotes that illustrate the main themes of my analyses.

Findings

Before offering a detailed and fine-grained analysis of how the socially mobile respondents managed to cope with the symbolic baggage of having resided in marginalised places, I begin this section with a brief discussion of experiences of territorial stigma encountered outside the neighbourhood of origin. At this point, it is important to stress that not all respondents continued to experience the negative reputation of their former neighbourhood. For instance, Thomas, an interior designer, gave a rich description of how frustrating it was for him to live in a

stigmatised housing estate close to a medium-sized city during his school days. But after he moved to another city in southern Germany to go to university it did not seem to concern him anymore: 'In Stuttgart, 400 kilometres away, nobody knew the area, it did not matter'. When his mother moved away from the area as well, Thomas lost all connection to his old neighbourhood: 'I don't know anyone there anymore and I have not been there for a long time. I really don't care', he explained.

Thomas' experience was shared by a few participants for whom spatial mobility resulted in a situation where the stigma of the old neighbourhood played little role in their new place of residence. They had encountered stigma as residents but felt that they were able to avoid it easily after moving. As another respondent, Damla, said: 'The move allowed me to shake off the image of the old foreigner neighbourhood'. But the reasons why these individuals no longer encountered territorial stigma after moving lie not only in the fact that they had often undergone extensive geographical mobility, it was also strongly connected to the (field) intensities and micro-geographies of the symbolic structures attached to their specific neighbourhoods of origin. In particular, what this group of interviewees had in common was that their stigmatised neighbourhoods of origin were less well known at a federal level and, in many cases, rather small.

However, interviewees from more notorious areas or who had experienced less geographical mobility provided many examples of experiencing their old neighbourhood's reputation. In fact, a common sentiment among my interviewees was that they continued to encounter derogatory, frightening, surprised or discriminatory remarks about their original neighbourhoods. This long shadow of territorial stigmatisation was experienced by people from neighbourhoods that had received a great deal of media attention beyond their local or regional level. Take for instance the narrative of Ibrahim from Berlin-Neukölln who, after his engineering studies, moved to Munich. As he explained:

> In Berlin it was never really an issue […] but when I was in southern Germany, Neukölln was really seen as the Bronx of Germany: a no-go area, a parallel society where everything bad had gathered. People always thought I was the very image of the 'good foreigner' – but when they heard me saying 'originally from Neukölln' they were a bit shocked, even disgusted. As if that was my true identity.

It was as a result of his geographical mobility that Ibrahim came into increasing contact with outsider perspectives. These external perspectives reduced the area of Neukölln to a homogeneous, simplified and narrow stereotype. Echoing the literature on external neighbourhood reputations of marginalised neighbourhood (Hastings, 2004; Permentier et al., 2008), these perceptions were less differentiated and, crucially, far more negative. With reference to his connection to Neukölln, Ibrahim was judged on the basis of the 'minority of the worst' (Elias and Scotson, 1994 [1965]), in which the least desirable characteristics of a minority in any area are attributed to all its (former) residents. As Elias and Scotson (1994 [1965]: 81) explained; this highly simplified presentation of the social realities 'created a black and white design which left no room for the diversities to be found among the [people from a stigmatised area]'.

Similarly, Suzanne from Berlin-Marzahn experienced territorial stigma more explicitly after she moved to another area. Born in 1991 in Berlin-Marzahn, Suzanne grew up in a neighbourhood that had become increasingly stigmatised in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Cuny, 2019). In 2011, when Suzanne began to study in Göttingen, she made, as she put it, a 'big mistake': She

introduced herself by saying that she came from Marzahn in Berlin. Consequently, her fellow students were calling her Suzzi from Marzahn, alluding to the famous fictional televised comedy character Cindy from Marzahn (an overweight unemployed woman who wears a jogging suit, and speaks in a strong Berlin dialect). 'That was meant as a joke by them, nicely meant, I guess, but I actually never found it funny [...] I found it demeaning'. For Suzanne, this resulted in feelings of shame and doubt: '[Particularly] when I went back to Marzahn for the term break, it felt super strange – as I was going back to a place where only *Einheitsverlierer* [losers of the German reunification] and the unemployed lived'.

While the Berlin neighbourhoods of Neukölln and Marzahn could be seen as particularly strong examples of the power of territorial stigma, respondents from symbolically marked neighbourhoods at the regional level reported having similar experiences when they remained in the same region (as interviewees from Offenbach, Chorweiler, Marxloh, Tenever and smaller housing estates indicated). Zlatan, for instance, was raised in Chorweiler, a large housing estate in Cologne, which is often described as a 'problem district' [*Problemviertel*]. Currently, he works as a computer scientist and lives in the centre of Cologne. Highlighting the sense of being a social pariah because of the neighbourhood of origin, he told me:

> People always think that I'm not from Germany – my name, my look. Therefore, I always say straight away: I'm originally from Chorweiler, I am a Cologne native. [...] Nowadays I'm not sure that that makes it any better. People are always shocked by the mention of Chorweiler. [...] Take for instance, my girlfriend's parents, they live in Frechen. Once, they asked me where I originally grew up – I said Chorweiler, of course. You can imagine their faces.

Like Ibrahim, Zlatan's narrative also laid bare the intersection of racial and territorial stigma. For Wacquant (2008: 238), territorial stigma is closely linked – but cannot be reduced – to race and ethnic origin. As Pinkster et al. (2020) and Kadıoğlu (2022) have argued, race is important to understand how territorial stigma is unevenly experienced by different groups of residents. My informants' narratives indicate that this is also the case for former residents. As the example of Zlatan vividly illustrates, his ethnicity and his background growing up in a notorious neighbourhood worked together to build a 'double disadvantage' to be faced. In fact, Zlatan's attempts to get rid of his 'foreigner' status required him to appeal to his German neighbourhood of origin – but this triggered the very same negative associations that he wanted to shed.

Generally, these examples illuminate how my respondents were able to move 'up' and 'out' – while still experiencing at first-hand how strongly people could react when they mentioned the name of their neighbourhood of origin. However, the interviews also illustrate that the research participants learned to relate to and cope with their reviled old neighbourhood. In this sense, the interview data revealed the more striking, sometimes more hidden ways in which the participants hoped to reduce the potentially negative consequences to them of the long shadow of territorial stigmatisation. However, as we will see in the next sections, in using these discursive strategies and tactics they predominantly acknowledged and reproduced, rather than resisted, these negative stereotypes about their neighbourhood's reputation.

Concealment: 'I stopped talking about it'

Concealment was by far the most frequent strategy that socially mobile individuals from stigmatised areas pursued. Several

participants reported a number of information management practices that they appropriated to avoid uttering the name of their old neighbourhood. As a consequence of their shame, embarrassment and concern in social situations, many interviewees did not see their old neighbourhood as an easy topic for small talk or something they wanted to bring up in everyday conversation. Guided by a strong belief that their colleagues or acquaintances would 'turn up their nose', they tried to hide the blemished area as best as possible.

Covering up the neighbourhood of origin was particularly evident in the work and business context. Many respondents mentioned that, in exchanges with colleagues or employers, be it at lunch, in interviews, during travel for business or in coffee breaks, they remained non-specific about their geographical origin, tried to change the subject if the 'area you are from' was ever raised or even lied. Take for instance Hilaria and Ralf from Chorweiler and Marzahn:

Interviewer: Do you openly say that you come from Chorweiler?
Hilaria: I'm not that stupid! For the interview here I told you that – and of course there are good friends who know it. But otherwise, I don't say so, at [company's name] for instance, of course, not. And it's nobody's business as well!

Interviewer: And there [at the workplace], do they know that story about Marzahn, or how do you deal with it?
Ralf: Depends on who and where, of course. If you mean at work: no, absolutely not. I wouldn't tell anyone there!

Moreover, some interviewees claimed that they did not tell colleagues when they had visited friends or family members in their old neighbourhoods, for instance, at the weekend. Other interviewees reported that they had looked for synonyms or paraphrases to avoid mentioning the name of the place and, in some instances, used street names of the names or different, untainted neighbourhoods.

In this way, the concealment strategies used by these socially mobile individuals closely resembled those of residents living in stigmatised areas (Wacquant et al., 2014). Pereira and Queirós (2014), for instance, found that residents of a stigmatised barrio in Porto used street names rather than neighbourhood ones when they talked with outsiders, while Purdy (2003: 91) shows how teenagers from Regent Park were 'consciously avoiding mentioning that they lived in the project'. These narratives also parallel McCormick et al.'s (2012: 302) study on relocated residents from Chicago, which shows how respondents remained silent 'when their stigmatised identity [was] threatened'.

Significantly, the reported difficulties in hiding their neighbourhood of origin varied greatly among the respondents. For many, it was a relatively simple task, an 'easy way to handle' the long shadow of territorial stigma. In fact, one female interviewee with a Turkish name described the extensive class, race and gender discrimination that she experienced through her upwardly mobile trajectory – and she noted that her geographical background was still the 'easiest' to disguise. However, for others, concealing their origin became a painful and isolating struggle. Mareike, for instance, spoke movingly about a sense of alienation she felt when she was 'too shy to tell' her colleagues where she was raised: 'But on the other hand, it really felt like betraying my family,

my home'. For Orhan, these feeling became manifested through a permanent anxiety that 'it will all come out', echoing Goffman's (1964: 73) view that 'when the discreditable fact is part of current life, then he must guard against more than relayed information; he must guard against getting directly caught in the act'. As Orhan explained:

> When I went back home on the weekends to see my parents, took the train, at the station, I was looking all around, checking to see if there was anyone from [company's name]. That sounds paranoid now, but every now and again I feel that I'm on the run.

Here, it is precisely Orhan's notion of 'being on the run', like an escaped criminal, that reveals the extreme difficulties of concealing and the emotional conflict of navigating between the symbolic social spaces that a number of respondents have encountered.[2]

Narrativisation: 'It was not easy to get out of there – but I made it!'

While many interviewees responded with silence and concealment, several respondents adopted a more offensive and confident discursive approach. This was particularly visible among white respondents whose economic capital had greatly increased (e.g. because they were now working in a higher management position or highly paid industries). For them, the old neighbourhood was a place they really enjoyed talking about – not only in the research interview, but, as they reported, also in everyday contexts. Significantly, the reason for this was not that they particularly liked the old quarter or felt they belonged there, nor did they attempt to construct positive narratives or contest the legitimacy of its reputation. Rather, these respondents used existing negative image to emphasise their own personal trajectory: their merit, talent and the hard work that

was necessary for people with such origins to overcome many structural barriers. As a consequence, these individuals were able to transform their situation 'from that of an individual with information to manage to that of an individual with uneasy social situations to manage' (Goffman, 1964: 100). Significantly, growing up in the old neighbourhood was seen as possessing some sort of symbolic capital (see Pinkster et al., 2020 for a comparable observation regarding white residents in a stigmatised housing estate) – tellingly, not the neighbourhood itself but the 'escape' from it. As Weber (1991 [1915]: 271) famously wrote more than 100 years ago: 'The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate', which is why 'good fortune thus wants to be "legitimate" fortune'. Take for instance, Maria, 46, who works as a financial controller. Throughout the interview, Maria emphasised how 'bad' and 'horrible' the place that she came from was, reproducing and reinforcing the dominant symbolic attribution of the neighbourhood. At one point, she even labelled the estate in the Ruhr as 'slummy' and as a 'ghetto'. However, when asked if she openly tells people of her neighbourhood of origin, she replied:

> I am very proud that I made it out of there, there is nothing to hide. Actually, I feel that people really appreciate my story.

In fact, Maria repeated several times when and how her upward journey started. For her, it was precisely this geographical context that worked as a powerful metaphor to highlight *the origin* in social space where her trajectory began, and how she, 'against all the odds', made it 'out'. As she put it: 'I think it was by being focussed and believing in myself that made the difference'.

Alexander, a 34-year consultant, described his old neighbourhood in the following words:

I always say, you cannot change where you come from, but, in Germany, when you fight, you can change where you are. [...] I mean there, in Chorweiler, there was really nothing going on, no motivation, no ambition, and people with this, let's call it, *Hartz-4-Mentalität* [benefit mentality]. To say it bluntly, a shithole, not with criminals, of course, there were drugs and so on, but I mean not like gangsters, but I would better say *assis* [antisocial peoples], *Unterschicht* [the underclass], just a bad environment. And then, of course, you have to work hard, to get out, to make it! It's not the way it is for kids whose parents where academics or teachers in Düsseldorf – you have to fight, and many give up or don't even start to fight. That's the worst thing – when people don't start to try [...], this kind of laziness that was there when I lived there, but now I see it again and again.

As Alexander's testimony underlines, the narrative of the 'escape route' was in many cases characterised not only by an individualistic emphasis on hard work but also fuelled by a denigration of the neighbourhood of origin and its residents, a sense of disgust that went far beyond critical evaluations or negative descriptions. These statements reflected popular 'urban underclass' and 'culture of poverty' semantics (Katz, 2013; Wacquant, 2022) and, crucially, distinguished the now upper-middle-class individuals from their former neighbours. Significantly, listening to this particularly strong and telling language, sometimes from the very first time that respondents expressed an interest in enrolling in my study, I was strongly reminded of Lawler's (2005) conceptualisation of middle-class identity as a feeling of disgust towards working-class existence and its spaces. Similarly, these narratives also echoed what authors focussing on insider perspectives have described as othering or 'lateral denigration and mutual distanciation' (Wacquant, 2008: 240; see also Jensen and Christensen, 2012; Pereira and

Queirós, 2014). By drawing divisions between striving 'upwardly mobile' subjects and the 'lazy' 'left-behind' residents, individuals like Maria and Alexander tried to deflect the stigma and gain value themselves.

To be clear, this is not to denigrate the actual hard work, effort and endurance of these participants, nor is to downplay the relatively limited resources that they had when they entered the competition for a higher social position in contemporary society. But, in the context of the long shadow of territorial stigma, we can understand these narratives also as a strategic way of responding to the powerful symbolic meaning of their old neighbourhood, to turn it to advantage in a society where meritocratic narratives and individual success stories are highly valorised. In order to highlight one's own merit and to provide evidence about their ability to leave behind their original challenging circumstances, the dominant discourse had to be reproduced, if not reinforced. Often this was done without regard for those who were not able or willing to 'escape', and these socially mobile individuals in this way not only managed to minimise the blame but were able to present and distinct themselves as deserving upper-middle-class 'performers'.

Resistance: 'I always knew that the ghetto image was bullshit'

While both of these coping strategies went hand in hand with the internalisation or reinforcement of dominant symbolic structures, a small number of interviewees offered a very different perspective. These participants actively resisted the negative reputation of their original neighbourhood by questioning public portrayals and offering re-scripted, positive counter-narratives about their old neighbourhood. For at least some interviewees, their higher social position was now

also seen as a chance, as one interviewee told me, 'to clear up prejudices and normalise this area'. Some 'always knew that the ghetto image was bullshit', others realised it 'when [they] were no longer living there'. Despite being in a rather privileged position now, this group offered important insights on how territorial stigma is refused and resisted. For instance, Michael, a unionist in the Ruhr, told me that 'Chorweiler has always had a soft spot in my heart'. Later in this interview, this was confirmed in the following interview passage:

Interviewer: How do you react them when this happens [when people react badly or with surprise when he said he is from Chorweiler]?

Michael: I tell them straight away say that this is bullshit, that they should take their defamations and fuck off. That I could go there at midnight, with two iPhones in my hands, without a care. It's all paranoia. I hope that this is also part of your research – that these images in people's heads, in the news, they need to be resisted by giving a more realistic picture of what goes on there.

Others like Ibrahim from Neukölln whom we introduced earlier in this article, went even further, noting how he would, time and time again, invite these 'sceptics' to come to Neukölln to eat the 'best dinner they have ever had'.

In fact, it was fascinating to see how some participants used the narrative part of the biographical interviews to minimise the power of territorial stigma, presenting a very different, positive portrait of their old neighbourhood and demonstrating an acute awareness of the prevailing mainstream narratives. In contrast to many of the views discussed earlier, they saw themselves as successful precisely *because* of their neighbourhood of origin, rather than in spite of it. Instead of the common rhetoric of having moved up out of bleakness, emptiness, misery and want, Mahmud, for instance, highlighted the 'great solidarity' in Dortmund-Nordstadt that helped him to go to university, while Ralf reported always feeling welcome in Berlin-Marzahn. Similarly, Sabine described how she would, in contrast to her current life in a posh single-family settlement, feel 'free' in Marxloh, where 'nobody would ever judge her'.

These narratives of resistance echoed what Purdy (2003: 98) has described as expressions of 'self-affirmation and pride of place' which have been found in several stigmatised neighbourhoods (Jensen and Christensen, 2012; Slater and Anderson, 2012; Wacquant et al., 2014). Moreover, these strategies echo, what Krase (1977) has termed as, the 'activists' of stigmatised inner city living. As Krase (1977: 1003) explains, this group is characterised 'by trying to prove that the stigma is inaccurate, unjustified, or they endeavour to improve the community in ways that bring it up to the standards of the "normal" '. In this way, we should not simply describe these positive discourses as 'glorification' (as Castro and Lindbladh, 2004: 266, do), but as a powerful message that the margins should be recognised as spaces of social value (Hooks. 1990).

However, it is also important to notice that this contesting group was quantitatively rather small and, crucially, that these respondents almost exclusively had been given a scholarship by progressive political institutions during their studies. Similarly, today, they mostly work in left-leaning areas (critical social science, trade unions, non-governmental organisations and alternative theatres). Arguably, these are fields in which dominant symbolic structures are both less pertinent and are also frequently challenged

and resisted. Put simply, as these interviewees socialise in environments critical of mainstream society, they might find it easier to express openly a 'counter-hegemonic re-scripting of place' (Nayak, 2019: 943).

Conclusions

In this article, I have argued for a more nuanced understanding of the experience of upward social and geographical mobility out from stigmatised neighbourhoods. Much of the vibrant academic literature on the lived experience of territorial stigma relies too narrowly on insider perspectives. In this way 'escaping' and moving 'away' are presented as individual 'tabula-rasa solutions' – almost as if by leaving you have shrugged off the burden of these symbolic structures and their consequences. By focussing on biographical interviews held with upwardly mobile former residents, the article has shifted attention to the long-lasting effects of territorial stigmatisation. The data illustrate how several respondents still experienced the consequences of negative neighbourhood reputation after they had left it behind. Crucially, the testimonies presented offer insights into how former individuals from particularly notorious neighbourhoods attempted to respond to the symbolic baggage of territorial stigma using concealment, narrativisation and resistance. These coping strategies often resembled those that the literature has identified among residents still living in stigmatised areas. Seen from this perspective, the consequences of territorial stigma followed several of the socially mobile former residents far beyond their original neighbourhoods: it changed their social interactions and, at worst, could turn everyday situations into stressful and emotionally difficult ones.

While these results echo the ambivalent experiences of relocated residents from Chicago (Keene and Padilla, 2010), I should stress that this is not to say that territorial stigma affects all geographically mobile residents from all denigrated areas to the same extent. Rather than being a 'badge of dishonour' that people acquire simply by virtue of having lived in a stigmatised place, several interviewees found themselves in a situation where they did not experience or had to cope with the image of the former neighbourhood. This was in particular the case for residents that have undergone extensive geographical mobility and came from areas that were less well known at national level. In fact, how 'easy' it is to shed the negative reputation of one's neighbourhood of origin ultimately depends on a whole range of different factors, including the individual's social position, their respective social field (Pinkster et al., 2020; Wacquant et al., 2014) and the characteristics of the symbolic structures attached to specific neighbourhoods. We should therefore be careful of using generalisations about the broad 'costs' of having been a former resident of places of relegation. Similarly, the reader should note that my analysis was based upon narrative interviews (partly conducted by Zoom) that illuminated the discursive strategies used by my respondents. Thus, participant observation methods could usefully supplement this work, contributing to a better understanding of how these coping strategies may have manifested in everyday practices.

Finally, there are two further implications I want to draw from this article; one academic, one practical. Firstly, while more theoretical light is needed on what might be described as the 'stickiness' of territorial stigma, the findings of this article call for scholars to engage in a more relational and field-specific way with the power of symbolic denigration. To put it bluntly, urban scholars are experienced in identifying neighbourhoods of relegation – however, once an area received the stigma label, there are few attempts that seek to compare the very different scales, intensities and micro-

geographies of these symbolic structures. While Wacquant, with his comparison between Paris and Chicago, originally called for a comparative study of urban marginality (Wacquant, 2008, 2016), stigmatised neighbourhoods have, in fact, rarely been studied comparatively or relationally (Glasze et al., 2012; Schultz Larsen, 2018). In this way, future research is necessary to systematically map the field-specific configurations of symbolic defamation within different contexts – and Bourdieu's methodological relationalism might serve as an excellent starting point for this endeavour (Wacquant, 2018).

Secondly, the empirical results also call for a more critical perspective on the popular (policy) response to urban marginality and its symbolic dimensions of using individual social mobility as a cure. In light of this interrogation, enabling some residents to move 'up' and 'out' turns out to be a rather limited solution – even from an individual perspective. Clearly, this is not to suggest that upward social mobility from stigmatised neighbourhoods is necessarily an alienating process, but it is empirically questionable that the experience of upward social mobility out of stigmatised neighbourhoods is as 'rewarding', smooth and straightforwardly beneficial as it is commonly said to be (e.g. in Chetty et al., 2020). In many cases, the scars of territorial stigma were noticeable in my respondents' biographical narratives.

Ultimately, academic and policy debates on the consequences of symbolic denigration cannot replace tackling the machinery of territorial stigmatisation in the first place. However, this does not mean we should simply raise the reputation of these neighbourhoods through image campaigns, to change individual attitudes or to find 'better' coping strategies. As Tyler (2020: 17) convincingly argues, stigma 'is always enmeshed with wider capitalist structures of expropriation, dominations, discipline and social control'. Looking 'back' and 'up', challenging the violence of territorial stigma must be rooted in its structural causes, its political economy and in seeking another system of valorisation – a system in which upward social mobility itself would probably be of little concern.

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Notes

1. Despite my initial reservations of doing so, conducting interviews via Zoom was a surprisingly positive experience. When analysing the transcripts, I found few differences between the Zoom interviews and the face-to-face ones. The reasons for this were that my analysis here focussed more on discourses

(rather than nonverbal communication and emotional expressions) and the interviewees (a) were individuals who, due to their class position and work environment, were almost always already very familiar with videotelephony; and (b) were particularly prepared to engage in long social exchanges due to the lockdown and social distancing measures. The latter was also confirmed by the high response rate during the lockdown.

2. See Goffman (1964: 87) for an extensive discussion on the 'psychic state of the passer'.

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